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ABSTRACT

Exploratory problem solving that utilizes self-educating techniques such as the evaluation of feedback to improve performance can be put to use in the composition classroom. Quantitatively evaluated prewriting exercises can help students in two ways: first, students learn to use procedures that can prepare them for more sophisticated devices; second, students unfamiliar with peer critiquing can learn to evaluate one another's prewriting work before they are asked to critique either more complex prewriting exercises or finished essays. Through a series of exercises, students practice substantiating or illustrating generalizations through the use of particular details or examples, then critique one another's papers by an actual count of the number of details used. Versions of the exercise call for two evaluators per paper and for an author's response. Problems with this form of peer critiquing are that basic writers do not always feel competent or willing to judge their peers' work, students are often unable to differentiate between details that are really examples of the generalization and details that are tangential, and much more work is created until students become familiar with the peer critiquing system. (The paper includes three examples of students' writing and tells how they were evaluated.) (AEA)

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Use of a Modified Heuristic Device to Teach Peer Critiquing to Basic Writers

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Use of a Modified Heuristic Device to Teach Peer Critiquing to Basic Writers

Many composition theorists ranging from Janice Lauer to Peter Elbow have demonstrated the need for introducing students to various heuristic procedures, systematic ways of solving problems intrinsic to the composing process. One example of a rather sophisticated heuristic is the nine-cell tagmemic grid developed by Young, Becker and Pike, and presented in Rhetoric, Discovery and Change. But to introduce the tagmemic heuristic, (or even Gordon Rohmann's journal/meditation/analogy heuristic) to basic writers generally results in the discouragement of students as well as teachers. A quantitatively evaluated pre-writing exercise can help students in two ways: first, students learn to use a procedure which can prepare them for a more sophisticated heuristic device such as the Pentad or the tagmemic grid; and secondly, students unfamiliar with the protocol of peer critiquing can learn to evaluate one another's pre-writing work before they are asked to critique either more complex pre-writing exercises, or finished essays.

In the Division of Rhetoric at Boston University's College of Basic Studies, each freshman writing instructor is responsible for 125 students, all of whom are required to take a two semester sequential composition course. When students arrive in September, their range of writing skills

is staggering; on the one hand, there are students who cannot assemble a sentence, and at the other extreme, those who can develop a very clear, cogent thesis statement (although these students constitute a very small minority). Our departmental syllabus for each semester course requires that each student write five formal papers, each approximately five hundred words long, and two impromptu essays, one for the midterm exam, and another for the final. In the second semester of the required course, students write three themes and a longer research paper, as well as an impromptu midterm and final.

When I started teaching composition under these circumstances, I quickly learned that for every theme assigned first semester, even if I spent only fifteen minutes grading each paper, there would be over thirty hours of grading every two weeks. However, this estimate only proved accurate when I could evaluate a five hundred word paper in fifteen minutes; often, particularly in the beginning of first semester, I needed more time. In addition to reading and grading themes, I had to allot time for individual conferences, to discuss the student's last paper and to prepare for the next. Despite my emphasis on pre-writing activities during class time, seven papers in one fourteen-week semester seemed to place an undue emphasis on the final stage in the writing process with a resulting neglect of the crucial pre-writing stage. It seemed to me that students should be writing for

my course at least every week, but understandably, I was reluctant to increase my already overwhelming work load. If students wrote more often and could participate regularly in the evaluation of one another's writing, then I could justify additional writing assignments without making unrealistic demands upon myself. At the same time, students would learn a pre-writing strategy which would easily segue into a modified version of the tagmemic heuristic, or into a specific pre-writing plan for papers assigned in other courses. Although my method clearly needs more refining, it is a beginning; the series of exercises described here gives students practice in substantiating or illustrating generalizations through the use of particular details or examples. The lack of such details is undoubtedly one of the most common complaints instructors make about student writing; every instructor knows that the phrases "Too vague!" or "Give me a particular example of this" flow almost automatically from the red pen.

The first form of the exercise is an incomplete generative sentence:

In my _____ the _____ are _____.

Using this form, the student supplies two nouns and either an adjective or a third noun to form a generalization, then, writes a paragraph offering specific details, illustrations or examples. Many of the exercises here make good raw material for a student theme; for example, when my colleague in the history department assigns our students a par-

ticularly complex essay on Dicken's Hard Times, I might use a variation of this exercise to help the student generate information about the novel's historical background.

" In Hard Times, there are several characters who reflect Adam Smith's economic philosophy."

or

" In James Joyce's 'Araby,' the young boy has several illusions which he must part with in the course of the story."

Here are the rules which govern use of the developmental exercises. At least a week before, I announce to students that there will be an in-class writing assignment, worth a maximum of five points or the equivalent of one-fourth of a formal rhetoric theme. Students have twenty to twenty-five minutes to flesh out the generalization as they wish. After twenty-five minutes, they exchange papers and become critics (On the evaluation form, I later changed this term to "readers," because many students thought the word "critic" had negative connotations), circling each particular detail or example.

During the course of my experimentation with these exercises, I altered the generalization slightly for each exercise, and eventually asked that two students critique each paper. Although in the earliest version of the exercise, I asked the student critic for a qualitative evaluation as well as a quantitative one (critics would award one point for every two details, illustrations, or examples, up to a max-

imum of five points), it soon became apparent that students only felt comfortable making a quantitative evaluation, particularly since the score was based on the quantity of examples.

Example 1 illustrates some of the problems experienced by critics making a quantitative evaluation. Although the student critic gave the writer a score of 3½ for eight details growing out of the generalization, the score should actually be 3.

Example 1 (Mike)

In my dorm the students are rowdy.

Every night after 10:00 my dorm seems to erupt. First there is my roommate who loves to play hockey.[1] Then there are the kids next door who love to jump up and down to make the dorm shake.[2] The other night three kids on the sixth floor got together and started yelling obscenities out the window at the people going by. Some kids on the ground heard them yelling and came up to the sixth floor and caused a riot.[3] Our Resident Assistant doesn't seem to care because he is always throwing a baseball up against the wall.[4] Another rowdy thing that takes place on my floor is the flushing of all the toilets while another person is taking a shower. This causes the temperature of the

> water to rise so that you burn your skin.[5] Bob, the kid in 608, has a set of weights and loves to lift them at 2:00 in the morning.[6] The only problem is that he decides to drop them on the floor.[7]

Although the student critic gave Mike a half point for "my roommate who loves to play hockey," Mike has not mentioned that the roommate plays hockey in the dormitory, and this is why he is considered rowdy. This critic was rather astute, however; she recognized that the two-sentence anecdote which constitutes illustration 3 is actually only one unit. Less skilled critics award two points in such a case, as I will illustrate shortly. However, even though the critic gave a careful quantitative evaluation of Mike's paragraph, she ignored the directions at the bottom of the exercise form, which asked her to indicate a qualitative evaluation and to award one point for each two details.

Because many student critics give credit where it is not due, in the second version of the exercise, I introduced a slight variation, asking that two critics read and evaluate the paragraph.

Example 2 (Brenda)

> In my high school the students were fashionable. For instance, every year when a new

> style comes out in the spring, fall, winter, or summer (for example, narrow leg pants,[1] or pleated skirts),[2] the girls in the high school I used to go to would be wearing it first. Like this fall, it was and still is reefer coats,[3] high heeled narrow-toed shoes[4] for girls fourteen and up. For the boys, down vests,[5] pleated straight leg tweed pants,[6] no-collar shirts[7] or a tie with a stay at the collar,[8] for boys fourteen and up. I see these high school students everyday dressing better than most adults. They are dressing this way to impress their peers and to prove that they are chic. Don't get the wrong impression that they dress this way every day, but they do most of the time.

The quantitative evaluation noted here is that of the first critic; the second critic gave Brenda five points, citing "pleated straight leg" and "tweed" as separate illustrations; similarly, the second critic gave a full point for "tie with a stay at the collar," counting "tie" and "stay at the collar," as two different illustrations. This method of tallying points makes it necessary to break the example down into its most basic components, and when the class as a whole discussed the exercise, I reviewed the scor-

ing system and at the same time encouraged them to make a grammatical analysis of phrases such as "tie with a stay at the collar."

The third version of the experimental exercise consisted of a different generative sentence: "I consider myself to be a _____ person." In version three, there was a space on the exercise sheet for the quantitative evaluations of two critics, as well as a space for the author's response. I omitted mention of a qualitative evaluation, deferring this until students felt comfortable with quantitative evaluation of their peers' papers.

Example 3 (Brenda)

I consider myself to be a gutsy person. The reasons I consider myself gutsy are these. I took on the task of organizing a Pep Club in a school where the school spirit is almost nil.[1] I ran for president of that club, when most of the members were hard-headed, bossy or lazy,[2] and I didn't have much in the sense of leadership.[3] I am currently enrolled in an all white class,[4] with no one in it to really communicate with.[5] I am on a team* that's almost all white.[6] I commute from Dorchester every day

*In the College of Basic Studies, teams of 120 students share the same schedule, and the same five faculty members for their rhetoric, humanities, science, social science, and psychology courses.

to this alientation.[7] I went to a high school that is at the bottom in academics with only Boston Trade and South Boston High below us.[8] I wear the clothes that I feel comfortable in even my blue high top Pro-Keds with red strings.[9] Because I only have me to please. I don't mind going to the movies alone.[10] I stood up to one of the top bullies in Jr. High when I wouldn't even talk to anyone. I brought my radio to High School when they were prohibited.[12]

The responses of the first critic are noted here.

This exercise promotes writing fluency, helps students learn the protocols for peer-critiquing, and introduces them to a pre-writing procedure which can eventually be built into a heuristic device. However, there were also several problems with this experiment in peer critiquing. First, basic writers do not always feel competent or willing to judge their peers' work. Eventually, my students began to feel more comfortable making a quantitative analysis, but they seldom offered a subjective evaluation, even when I asked them to do so. A related weakness of the exercise can be attributed to the tendency of second critics to rely too heavily on the evaluation offered by first critics.

Another problem with the procedure results from stu-

dents' inability to differentiate between details which are truly examples of the generalization, and details which are tangential. This is actually a deficiency in logic, but class discussions of such points of logic generally prove fruitful for students.

Finally, this experimenter must reluctantly admit that what began as a time-saving device to make students write more, but let them critique one another, ended by creating much more work, at least until students became familiar with the peer critiquing system. Student evaluations of their peers had to be checked and double checked, and class time had to be given over to discussion and clarification of evaluation procedures, points of logic, and disagreements between critics over scoring.

However, after three experiences with the procedure, students began to catch on. Had it not been so near the semester's end, I might have had time to develop practical criteria for qualitative evaluations. Despite the obvious limitations of such a procedure, however, it is a necessary prelude to introducing basic writers to the use of more sophisticated heuristics and to peer evaluation of pre-writing activities.